

Identity, Distinction, and Action:  
Re-evaluating the Self in the Work of Taylor, Foucault, and Arendt

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## **I. An Introduction to the Identity Discourse<sup>1</sup>**

The idea of “finding oneself” is familiar to many, if not most, of those in the Western world today. It has become second nature to speak of identity in terms of something to search for and, ultimately, to discover, something to work out with the hopes of uncovering and releasing one’s authentic self, the unique way of being that belongs to each individual. Yet this is a thoroughly modern way of thinking about identity, a drastic change from the Ancient Greek conflation of identity and citizenship, where one’s identity was necessarily tied up with the obligations of citizenship and participation in the public realm. Instead of this connection between identity and public action, it is more common now to understand identity as something unique to each individual self, something that manifests differently in everyone’s own manner of living, and something that needs to be discovered and adhered to, or else risk missing the point of life itself. It is the idea that “everyone is special” and that each individual has a unique contribution to make to the world, in the form of an authentic self and a way of living that can never be replaced or repeated by another.

In all its conceptions, identity is the connection between the self and the world: it shapes how one enters that world and determines the manner in which one addresses and is addressed by a given community. As such, it is at the same time both unique and universal: everyone has an identity, but each person’s identity is distinct and especially their own. Given this importance of

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identity to making sense of worldly experiences, it seems that the framework and the vocabulary used to discuss identity are, too, very important. This significance of identity is evident in how often identity is entangled with a discourse of freedom—there is something inherently liberating about appearing and being acknowledged in the world, a freedom in holding nothing back and instead displaying one's identity and being remembered as a unique individual. Yet the discourse surrounding identity has made significant shifts throughout the history of man. In the model of the Ancient Greek polis, one's identity was displayed by literally appearing outside for public discussion in the agora, and was contingent on a level of liberation from the necessary activities of the household and the ability to leave the confines of the house—with its focus on food, rest, and shelter—and participate in public discourse. The modern conception of identity, however, has moved inward and is now discussed as something to be found personally, in those private spaces the Greeks were trying to escape, and is reliant on a specific self-knowledge and the proper articulation of its consequences. This is the fundamental change in the conception of identity—away from an emphasis on self-forgetting and concern for the world, and towards a focus on individual lives and the necessary self-knowledge such a focus requires. Because identity is both universal and unique, it remains one of humanity's most valuable and most contested goods. Like freedom and politics, identity is something that affects everyone and that at the same time each person perceives differently, leaving extensive room for debate and discussion as to the most correct way in which to conceptualize identity. This is where the shift in the popular perception of identity—from something grounded in self-forgetting and active participation in politics, to the idea that identity is a form of self-knowledge and conscious control over one's life—gains its importance.

And yet, what is at stake in this shift in how identity is perceived is not merely a philosophical disagreement as to the nature of identity—the manner in which it is created and expressed. Ultimately, this is a contention over the relationship between an individual and the larger community. This is also the nature of the shift in perception regarding the nature of one's citizenship: moving from a bundle of duties and obligations through which one has access to the public realm, an active role in the public discourse and a chance for distinction, to a more modern idea of citizenship as a set of protections *from* the public eye, a secure space in which one can undertake the more important private concerns of ordinary life and worries of self-articulation.

This paper is another part of the identity discourse. Section II initially introduces the “modern” conception of identity as it appears in the work of Charles Taylor as a quest for the recognition and articulation of an “authentic self,” exploring the compelling aspects of that framework, as well as its faults. Section III then uses Michel Foucault's critique of this search for an authentic identity to explore a popular alternative in the modern identity discourse: that one's identity, far from being something independent and “findable,” is instead inherently contingent on the manipulations of social power, and is simply a product of the social values under which one lives. And yet, while these two different conceptions of identity have often been considered radically opposed theories of the self, this paper brackets the two together in the same limiting framework with the use of a third alternative. To that end, Section IV introduces Hannah Arendt's theory of identity, based on the model of the Ancient Greek polis, which equates identity with political action and public appearance. The body of the paper then uses this framework to present an Arendtian critique of the modern identity discourse of which Taylor and Foucault are a part.

By using the theory of identity present in Arendt's work, it becomes clear that the modern conceptions of identity presented by Taylor and Foucault are grounded in a form of self-knowledge—whether in regards to the expression of an authentic identity or to acts of resistance against a manipulative social power. Section V explores the selfish aspects of this conscious exercise of self-knowledge that requires one to focus on one's personal concerns, presumes a level of control over one's own life and the articulation of one's identity, and is innately self-obsessive when contrasted to Arendt's emphasis on public participation in politics, and the self-forgetting that participation requires. Taking this further, Section VI looks at how, by encouraging the self to withdraw from the public realm and focus on these introspective identity projects, Taylor and Foucault necessarily separate the self from politics, fundamentally depoliticizing identity and cutting the self off from not only the realm where one's identity is unconsciously revealed to others through one's public actions, but also the realm of freedom itself.

At the same time, the Arendtian theory of identity has come under criticism for its relevance in the modern world, with its expanded population and shrinking public sphere, as well as for its narrowly defined conception of politics. Section VII addresses these concerns, while arguing that the Arendtian conception of identity, as it is revealed in political action, maintains its importance—even with these modern shifts in sensibilities—because the focus of Arendt's work is the act of self-forgetting and participation in the public discourse, both of which can still be found in the world as it is today. Expanding on Arendt's work, this paper argues for a public discourse that is more inclusive and more abstract than it appears in her original conception—public speech and action are no longer limited to the face-to-face interactions between propertied men that marked the politics of the Greek agora, but can instead be extended to include various

other, decentralized and expansive, public discussions. These “new” examples of political discourse retain an emphasis on a world that exists beyond the natural limits of a single individual’s life, are fundamentally unnecessary and are therefore inherently free, even if they do not entail a public meeting of the entire civic body in person. Because of their unique ability to provide a space in which one can reveal one’s identity to others, these new examples of political discourse should be expanded, and individuals should be encouraged, not towards the personal fulfillment of a self-project, but towards active engagement in the public discourse and the act of self-forgetting that participation requires.

## **II. The Modern Identity as an “Authentic Self”: Charles Taylor**

The modern notion of identity as an articulation of an “authentic self” is perhaps best illustrated in the work of the political philosopher Charles Taylor, who grounds his theories of the self and identity in the real-world feelings and experiences one encounters on a daily basis. Taylor argues that “[m]y identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable... it is the horizon within which I am capable of taking a stand.”<sup>2</sup> For Taylor, a necessary step towards the formation of a coherent identity is the search for a framework within which one can make decisions while remaining true to one’s authentic self, the “*individualized* identity... that is particular to me and that I discover in myself.”<sup>3</sup> Taylor illustrates this notion of identity with a spatial metaphor: one’s identity is the unique place from which one stands and

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 27.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, edited by Amy Gutmann (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 28.

perceives the world. It is then up to each individual to make efforts to understand for himself exactly where that space is and the ramifications of that position. Identity, for Taylor, is a specific orientation to “the good,” those goods, activities, and values that one esteems above all else, and because of this, are the centerpieces around which one orders one’s life. Identity is then a set of preferences in pursuit of this goal, and it becomes the task of the individual to discover exactly that orientation that fits his life and expresses his authentic self. In this understanding of identity, what is important is a personalized journey to uncover one’s unique identity—it is an intrinsic, individualized notion of an authentic self that can only be discovered introspectively, that drives Taylor’s support for such a self-project.

Yet Taylor is also not blind to the effect of others or to the inherently dialogical character of identity, the way in which one’s identity is not created in isolation, but is instead influenced in relationships with others—he is careful to leave space for the help of others, namely parents, friends, and others, in this quest. Taylor very adamantly makes clear the social aspects of identity, that an identity in isolation is incoherent. The self requires these outside relationships, with those whom Taylor calls “significant others,” to provide guidance in this search for one’s authentic self. This is what he means in saying that “[w]e define our identity always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the things our significant others want to see in us.”<sup>4</sup> These significant others are both helpful and necessary in the search to recover one’s authentic self, they act as both a mirror and a sounding board, pointing out those things which one may not or cannot see in oneself, and helping to flesh out the picture which one begins to sketch out alone.

At the same time as this dialogical nature of identity is necessary for a stable, coherent self attained with the aid of significant others, the dependency of the self on its community can

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 32-33.

also have negative results. Taylor believes “our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the *misrecognition* of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves.”<sup>5</sup> Under this theory of misrecognition, for example, a woman raised in a culture that oppresses and demeans women will be crippled with a sense of her own inferiority of skills and capabilities throughout her life, whether or not she remains physically located in that society. In this example, through the fundamental misrecognition of their identity and potential worth, women from this oppressive society have “internalized a picture of their own inferiority, so that even when some of the objective obstacles to their advancement fall away, they may be incapable of taking advantage of the new opportunities [available to them].”<sup>6</sup> Thus, what Taylor sees as such a problem by introducing the possibility of misrecognition is that it seems to hold one back from achieving, or even being recognized for, one’s potential by saddling one with a debilitating picture of the self. Misrecognition is the “dark side” of the social aspect of identity—for Taylor, locating one’s self within the context for relationships with others *is* necessary, and yet can at the same time cause serious problems if mishandled.

Misrecognition, then, is the source of concern underlying the political implications of Taylor’s project. Because of the potentially crippling nature of misrecognition, Taylor advocates a form of multiculturalism in which those subordinated groups that could come under oppression from the majority would be protected through legal rights and cultural traditions, and given the chance to develop for themselves their unique identities. Politically, then, Taylor requires “that

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*



we should strive to create more institutional space to allow otherness to be... [since] the solution of full integration into our self-governing community can demand too high a price from them in terms of their identity and way of life.”<sup>7</sup> This means building specific protections into the law, such as those protecting freedom of expression or allowing for the cultural preservation of minority groups—giving these “others” the legal security to articulate their identities honestly and legitimately. For Taylor, requiring these unique communities to fully integrate means forcing them to assimilate to the dominate social norms, and encouraging an abandonment of those qualities and manners of living which are distinctly their own. This consequence is, for Taylor, too damaging for these unique identities, and therefore must be prevented with the force of law.

Along with the creation of this institutional space, however, Taylor advocates a sort of multiculturalism that expands upon a doctrine of equal respect. It requires a “fusion of horizons” in which “[w]e learn to move in a broader horizon, within which what we have formerly taken for granted as the background to valuation can be situated as one possibility alongside the different background of the formerly unfamiliar culture.”<sup>8</sup> By this, Taylor means to recognize the innate conditionality present in the comparison of unique cultural identities. Here, one comes to understand that one’s own framework, the cultural identity of one’s background is not universal, and is but one possible framework among many equal, but different, others. On a more personal level, this multiculturalism requires not that each identity *will* have something valuable to offer, but instead that each self is given an equal opportunity to have its worth explored on its own terms, as something that necessarily has the *potential* to be valued for itself and its unique contributions.

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<sup>7</sup> Charles Taylor, "Connolly, Foucault, and Truth," *Political Theory*, Vol. 13 No. 3, (August 1985), 384.

<sup>8</sup> Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," 67.

Yet even as this notion of identity depends largely on the people and community with whom the self interacts, at the same time “[b]eing true to myself means being true to my own originality, which is something only I can articulate and discover.”<sup>9</sup> The quest to discover one’s identity is a fundamentally internalized, personal task. In order to be true to oneself, it is necessary to do some soul-searching in an effort to discover, and ultimately to decide the authenticity of, the framework of preferences that shapes one’s actions. It is up to the self to decide which set of values fit one’s life the best, and are the clearest articulation of who one really is. Under this ideal of authenticity one need not attempt to meet with external criteria of what constitutes humanity, there is no universal standard of “the good”—like an ideal of the active citizen, ascetic, or heroic warrior—to which all individuals are held. Even using the vocabulary of authenticity itself assumes the importance of the individual to this project—the language of authenticity precludes repetition or duplication of one’s unique self on the part of another. Instead, one must take it upon oneself to “develop an original way of understanding [oneself] and human life,”<sup>10</sup> and to verify that it is this unique manner of living that encapsulates one’s authentic identity correctly. The act of moving one’s identity away from engagement with the public space, and locating it within the individual as some sort of inner truth that must be articulated, means that one’s peers no longer have the same level of importance. Taylor’s “significant others” are significant only in that they give the self a context within which to work itself out, to discover and articulate one’s authentic manner of being—one’s community takes on a supporting role, helping one to articulate the inner truth of one’s authentic, unique identity.

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>10</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 35.

This inner truth of an authentic self is so important to Taylor that he locates freedom itself in its discovery and articulation. In this sense, Taylor finds freedom in the self-knowledge that comes from discovering and articulating one's authentic identity. This means that "freedom now involves my being able to recognize adequately my more important purposes and my being able to overcome or at least neutralize my motivational fetters... [which requires] me to have become something, to have achieved a certain condition of self-clairvoyance and self-understanding. I must be actually exercising self-understanding in order to be truly or fully free."<sup>11</sup> One can only be free if one is able not only to understand who one is, one's authentic self, but also to actually have the ability to successfully act towards the articulation of that identity and the goals and purposes that accompany and define it. Taylor's conception of freedom is thus resolutely entangled with that of identity—freedom also has an inherently personal and private nature, one that cultivates "the sense we have of ourselves as free, self-defining subjects whose understanding of their own essence or of their paradigmatic purposes is drawn from within, and no longer from a supposed cosmic order in which they are set."<sup>12</sup> Taylor's idea of freedom demands an inward gaze and a sense of exercised self-understanding. Freedom, for Taylor, is explicitly connected with the availability and exercise of self-knowledge, and remains solely in the possession of each single, though socially embedded, individual.

In this personalized sense, Taylor's conception of identity democratizes the "good life," placing it within reach of every person. Because one's moral standards are located internally, because there is no longer a universalized, external moral standard upon which to judge one's

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<sup>11</sup> Charles Taylor, "What's Wrong with Negative Liberty," *The Liberty Reader*, edited by David Miller, (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2006), 162.

<sup>12</sup> Charles Taylor, "Foucault on Freedom and Truth," *Political Theory*, Vol. 12 No. 2, (May 1984), 155.

life's success, Taylor's conception of identity requires that everyone should be treated with equal dignity and respect because their way of living, the framework of their identity, is no less legitimate than any other. This is what Taylor calls the "affirmation of ordinary life," in which "the notion that there is a certain dignity and worth in this life requires a contrast; no longer, indeed, between this life and some 'higher' activity like contemplation, war, active citizenship, or heroic asceticism, but now lying between different ways of living the life of production and reproduction... the key point is that the higher is to be found not outside of but *as a manner of living* ordinary life."<sup>13</sup> This again hearkens back to the introspective nature of the modern identity—because the devotion to this quest for an authentic self has superseded the external modes of living the good life, it becomes all the more important to discover and articulate the unique manner of living, that orientation which gives one's life meaning, in one's everyday life without needing to appeal to those "higher" activities. Because one is no longer appealing to a universally articulated, external goal—say, success or glory in battle—to be the highest good one can achieve, the burden of defining "the good life," and then achieving it, rests solely in the hands of the individual selves, and the manner in which they articulate their identities and ways of living. It becomes all the more important to discover exactly what this identity is, because only then will one be able to live "the good life." This is even more crucial when Taylor reveals the stakes of this project of finding and articulating an authentic self: "...this notion gives a new importance to being true to myself. If I am not, I miss the point of my life; I miss what being human is for *me*... It accords moral importance to a kind of contact with myself, with my own inner nature, which it sees as in danger of being lost."<sup>14</sup> Taylor moves the basis of moral

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<sup>13</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 23.

<sup>14</sup> Taylor, "Politics of Recognition", 30.

judgment of one's life away from an external, uniform framework, like those of active citizenship or heroic asceticism, and elevates the personal manner of living, the everyday experiences of individuals, to take on that role.

This is what is so compelling about Taylor's conception of identity. It removes very serious barriers to achieving the good life by elevating one's unique, yet everyday, manner of living to fill this role. In this sense, Taylor introduces a sense of egalitarianism into the understanding of identity—in the idea that *everyone's* manner of living has the potential to be of value—that appeals to the modern sensibilities informed by democratic ideals and the doctrine of universal human rights. Furthermore, the way in which Taylor discusses identity effectively provides a shield from the harsh light of the public sphere, by transforming the search for identity into a personal task. This need for protection speaks to a deep-set fear of the unknown, in the vulnerability that is attached to public participation and the consequences of acting in concert with others. In speaking of the public as something from which to be protected, public participation is connected with a sense of not knowing—by connecting one's life with the actions of others, the self loses any semblance of control over one's own life and identity. By elevating the self-project, that locates itself in the privacy of individual lives, Taylor separates identity from the general public and the impressions and judgments of strangers and, in a way, provides comfort for the fragile self, reserving its interactions for the smaller, more familiar sphere of intimate relationships only. Taylor leaves the discussion of identity here, holding up the ideal of a unique, authentic self that belongs to each individual. It then remains for each person to discover, articulate, and stay true to this identity, or else miss the point of one's life.

### III. A Critique of the “Authentic Self”: Michel Foucault

Instead of this theory of identity as something authentic—something concrete and in need of discovery and articulation—an alternative interpretation of identity and the self is present in the work of Michel Foucault. Far from grounding his work in a framework of authenticity, Foucault rejects the idea that there is any pre-existing self which can be recognized or misrecognized by its surrounding society. Instead, for Foucault, “the self” is little more than a bundle of contingencies, created through various social institutions like schools and prisons, and therefore dependent on those same social conditions for coherence. At the same time, the idea that identity is created through these social institutions means, for Foucault, that the self is a manifestation of social power, and that even the search for recognition and the project of self-articulation is a mechanism of social control. Given this picture of the self, a self created and maintained through a web of social power, Foucault is primarily worried about the consequences of creating these value systems in the first place, and the effect of power that makes the self into a subject.

While the majority of Foucault’s insights into the nature and position of the self come in the context of writing about more concrete instances of sexuality, criminality, and madness, his conclusions can just as easily be applied to identity more generally: “The notion that we have a sexual nature is itself a product of those modes of knowledge designed to make us objects of control. Our acceptance that we have such a nature makes us an object of such control. For now we have to find it and set our lives to right by it.”<sup>15</sup> This is the aspect of the more common modern conception of identity to which Foucault objects: the idea that such thing as an “authentic self” exists forces one to find and articulate that authenticity or else “miss the point”

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<sup>15</sup> Taylor, “Foucault on Freedom and Truth,” 160.

of one's entire life. In raising the stakes of this control to encompass the success or failure of one's life itself, this project of recognition solidifies and completes the self as an object of control, going further than even Foucault envisioned by equating this search for identity with the meaning of one's life. And yet, where the modern identity locates meaning, Foucault finds a menace as he sees danger at work in committing oneself to the project of self-definition, as acceptance of this conception of identity means that the self has willingly submitted to social control.

At the same time, this worry of social institutions doing harm to the self upon which they exert power is one of the most troubling aspects of Foucault's work, as it seems unclear exactly what he sees as being damaged by this project of recognition and self-articulation. According to this critique, Foucault's position is untenable, as it would not only be impossible to strip away all social influences, in an effort to "undo" the social damage Foucault is concerned with, but it would also leaving nothing left, making it hard to understand exactly what damage Foucault believes this ideal of authenticity to do. And yet, what concerns Foucault about the construction of identity in terms of authenticity is its framework of transcendental truth, and how it ignores the ways in which a self and one's identity is created by various institutions. While Foucault himself would not suggest the possibility of separating oneself completely from the network of social power in which one is situated—in fact, he strictly denies this possibility—he worries about the ways in which an ideal of authenticity creates a hold for power, and thus fundamentally does damage to the self by forcing one to articulate a single, set identity framed in terms of "natural" and "authentic," even as it neglects the mechanisms of power and social manipulation that are inherent in identity itself.

Foucault's project results in troubling Taylor's conclusions, undermining the picture of a singular self to which one is tied for the duration of one's life. In this sense, Foucault focuses on the ways in which this project of recognition and self-articulation is a manifestation of social power—on the ways in which one is constantly manipulating and being manipulated by one's relationship to a larger society. For Foucault, the social influences that Taylor sees as insignificant, like acquiring a taste for the food of one's native country,<sup>16</sup> are expanded upon and extended to the level of identity and behavior. For Foucault, the importance placed on recognizing an authentic self is itself a product of the society in which one lives, and is an ideal that ties the self to a single identity, imposing a constructed identity on a contingent self, thus trapping the individual in a single identity. This is the fundamental difference between Foucault and Taylor: for Taylor, one cannot be truly free without the self-knowledge that comes specifically from recognition of an authentic identity, while for Foucault it is exactly this recognition, the knowledge of one's identity, which traps the self. For Foucault, the required self-awareness of Taylor's work illustrates the way in which "[t]his form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him *which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him.*"<sup>17</sup> It is precisely this recognition, of self and by others, that Taylor lauds and Foucault abhors.

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 173: "In human life, it [the phenomenon of imprinting] also exists after a fashion. We generally come to like the foods that have assuaged our hunger, those we are fed as children in our culture. Is this an index of domination of our culture over us? The word would use all useful profile, would have no more distinctiveness, if we let it roam this wide."

<sup>17</sup> Michel Foucault, "Afterword: The Subject and Power," in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, by Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982), 212. (emphasis mine)



To use Taylor's vocabulary from the Foucauldian perspective, the identity project of Taylor's work is itself a form of misrecognition—to impose the ideal of an authentic self that must be recognized and articulated is to fundamentally misunderstand the nature of the self, and to therefore do it the lasting psychological damage that comes from the imposition of power from external sources. One's individualism, far from being championed as the concrete source of one's potential worth and respect, becomes under Foucault's interpretation the mark of the self as subject to the power at work in a society. The work of finding and articulating that individualism is phrased in terms of a scientific search for some ultimate truth that will help to explain all aspects of one's life. In so doing, it also creates the definition of normalcy, where one is normal or abnormal based on how well one successfully undergoes self-examination in pursuit of this goal. Even Taylor, as he champions uniqueness and each individual's unique manner of living, falls into this language of normalcy in acknowledging those who lack this self-knowledge or drive for self-articulation as somehow abnormal, "lost in space," and in need of help. There is, Taylor thinks, something fundamentally wrong with them.<sup>18</sup> It is this whole process, then, that changes the self to subject, "subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge."<sup>19</sup> From Foucault's perspective, the "need" to uncover and articulate one's "true" identity is another manifestation of social power—the constant scrutiny and surveillance that systematizes individuals and makes selves subject to society's control—but an internalized form, one that forces the subject to constantly undergo self-examination in the hopes of recovering and remaining loyal to an authentic self. In turning the self into subject, subject to the categorization as normal or not, Foucault is interested in the

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<sup>18</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 27.

<sup>19</sup> Foucault, "Subject and Power," 212.

ways in which the creation and discussion of an authentic way of being necessarily creates an ideal of “normalcy” and discipline. By creating an ideal of authenticity that must be recognized, supporting this successful search for an authentic identity necessarily creates a space for those in whom this recognition has not taken place, for those who have failed to successfully find and articulate their “true selves.” “Normal” requires an “abnormal” to make any sense at all, and by encouraging the self to undertake this self-project in search of recognition, Taylor is marking those who refuse or fail as abnormal “others,” going so far as to label them as somehow incomplete or wrong. By setting up the idea of an authentic self which one must find and to which one must remain loyal, the framework in which Taylor’s project exists creates a false ideal of normalcy that individuals are encouraged to comply with, with the help of experts, or else find themselves marked as abnormal “others.”

Far from the helpful, desirable way in which Taylor characterizes “significant others” as the source of external assistance in one’s search for identity, the existence of “experts” is, for Foucault, a tangible sign of this normalizing power inherent in the need to discover and articulate an authentic identity. Whereas Taylor believes this search impossible to undertake alone, for Foucault the need for outside help in discovering one’s authentic identity emphasizes the “scientific” nature of this undertaking—one requires the help of experts to untangle the subjective nature of identity— and makes selves then subject to scrutiny. The significant others in Taylor’s work are thus similar in purpose to Foucault’s “experts”: they encourage the self in the process towards articulating an “authentic” identity. Thus, though Taylor’s “significant others,” namely one’s family and friends, may not be exactly the same people Foucault intended by “experts,” like therapists and psychologists, their function as a source of external help for a soul-searching self remains the same: they “help” the individual to better understand and

articulate a specific identity. “And part of putting ourselves in their hands is our avowal, the requirement that we go on trying to *say* what we are like, what our experience is, how things are with us... It helps the cause of control partly in that it presents us as enigmas who need external help to resolve ourselves; and partly in that it has created the very idea of sex... the understanding of sexuality as the locus of crucial fulfillment for ourselves as human beings.”<sup>20</sup> By applying Foucault’s conclusions about the nature of sexual identity to the larger question of identity more generally, it seems clear that where Taylor sees liberation and coherence in the help of significant others in finding and articulating an authentic self, Foucault sees this same reliance on “experts” as a direct manifestation of social control at work. The fact that Taylor advocates the importance of this undertaking, and therefore virtually requires participation in this self-project, in the sense that to neglect it is to miss the point of life itself, ties the self to an identity which results in the subjugation of the self to the control of others.

With his emphasis on the ultimately contingent, socially constructed nature of the self’s identity, Foucault criticizes the modern identity discourse’s construction of freedom as a form of exercised self-knowledge. Instead, Foucault sees this form of self-knowledge as binding—restricting the self to a single constructed identity. In this sense, the self-knowledge that Taylor lauds as the source of freedom instead keeps one “tied to his own identity by a conscience or self knowledge,”<sup>21</sup> and in so doing “implies a knowledge of the conscience and an ability to direct it.”<sup>22</sup> Foucault is articulating a freedom-limiting aspect of the obsession with the authentic self: it demands that one submit to various mechanisms of social control and identify with a specifically

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<sup>20</sup> Taylor, “Foucault on Freedom and Truth,” 161.

<sup>21</sup> Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” 212.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

articulated identity. Instead, Foucault locates what restricted sense of freedom he allows in the individual's resisting acts against those stifling and subjecting forces in society. This is Foucault's project: "a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying."<sup>23</sup> But this is no generalized or transcendental project—like identity itself, it is up to each individual to undergo this critical self-evaluation. "It will separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think...it is seeking to give new impetus, as far and as wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom."<sup>24</sup> While Taylor characterizes Foucault's idea of freedom as "the illegitimate conclusion that there can be no question of liberation from the power implicit in a given set of practices [that form the background to our actions and are thus irremovable],"<sup>25</sup> he also admits "the possibility of frequently moving from one set of practices to another."<sup>26</sup> This is where Foucault's sense of freedom is located—far from the internalized, universal form of freedom present in Taylor's work, that of uncovering a single liberating truth, Foucault's freedom is the undertaking of a constantly changing, but similarly focused, individual project of "escaping" one set of social powers and entering into a new set just to start the process of dislodging the self once again. William Connolly describes this project as "deploying rhetorical devices to incite the experience of discord or discrepancy between the social construction of self, truth, and

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<sup>23</sup> Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?," in *The Foucault Reader* edited by Paul Rabinow, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 46.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Taylor, "Foucault on Freedom and Truth," 174.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

rationality and that which does not fit neatly within their folds.”<sup>27</sup> Freedom is, for Foucault, a continual “shaking loose” of the self from these entrenched socially constructed truths, and the expression of the acts of rebellion and resistance which one undertakes to evade the grip of social control and prevent binding one to an ideal of authenticity

Foucault’s project works to trouble Taylor’s conception of identity with worries of contingency and social control even as it forwards its own conception of the proper project the self should undertake, namely a constant project of self-criticism and resistance to social manipulations. Foucault’s concerns with “trapping” the individual in a single identity articulate an important downside to the modern identity project, namely the danger in blindly accepting it. Foucault highlights the constructed nature of the self, and in so doing, shows that the assumptions that lie at the heart of Taylor’s work—namely this idea that there exists an authentic self to which one can and should “remain true”—are precisely those assumptions within which Foucault’s subject is situated and must therefore resist, and that Foucault himself means to upset. And this is where the political implications of Foucault’s project can be found: as Taylor focuses on the creation and care of the self, and giving the self that institutional space in which to undertake this project, Foucault’s positive project is an endorsement of a constant criticism and critical evaluation of the entrenched system of values in which one finds oneself, untangling the self from one manner of control only to find it in another and repeating the process indefinitely. Connolly’s interpretation of Foucault’s project amounts to a constant expression of “‘little deviant acts’ in a life where accumulated conventions are always becoming naturalized and

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<sup>27</sup> William Connolly, “Taylor, Foucault, and Otherness,” *Political Theory*, Vol. 13 No. 3, (August 1985), 368.

moralized.”<sup>28</sup> By this, he means to advocate the constant rebellion against social norms, an individual’s conscious deviance from the expectations of one’s society, and a constant effort to re-examine and trouble the customs and expectations that, while artificial, have taken on the semblance of natural distinctions, and as such lend themselves to creating distinctions between normal and not. While these distinctions may not, in fact, be avoided entirely, this project of rebellion and self-criticism is how one asserts oneself, in pushing against those overarching ideals of authenticity—by resisting the pressure to find and articulate the inner truth of a single authentic identity and the accompanying moral distinctions that lack any natural basis. Connolly summarizes Foucault’s project as such: “This political project of estrangement from the identity given to us before we are in a position to appraise it critically is the obverse of Taylor’s project...of drawing us into the endorsement and perfection of the identity now given to us.”<sup>29</sup> Foucault’s work serves to directly call into question the underlying assumptions on which Taylor’s project is founded, and to induce one to undertake this critical evaluation of the self, the idea of “identity” as such, and the claim to an ultimate truth that it embodies.

At the same time as he resists the search for an authentic identity, Foucault at times seems hesitant to relinquish the idea of a self-project as a whole. In fact, Foucault’s project of estrangement and critical appraisal of one’s identity is itself a concentrated concern with the self and its position, and especially in his later work, Foucault advocates a “care of the self” that is fundamentally still grounded in a form of self-knowledge and awareness. Even as Foucault criticizes the quest for recognition as an implication of knowledge and ability to direct a

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<sup>28</sup> William Connolly, “Beyond Good and Evil: The Ethical Sensibilities of Michel Foucault,” *Political Theory*, Vol. 21 No. 3, (August 1993), 373.

<sup>29</sup> William Connolly, “Taylor, Foucault, and Otherness,” *Political Theory*, Vol. 13 No. 3, (August 1985), 372.

conscience, Foucault's "care of the self" is fundamentally about directing the self away from the influences of social power. The endorsement of this project of making the self elusive, temporarily "freeing" the self from specific instances of social power, implies a form of control over the self, and as such is still an expression of conscious self-knowledge. Foucault does not necessarily criticize the self-project *as such*, but instead resists its codification, the manner in which it acquired the language of normalcy and became about finding and articulating a hidden truth about the self. What Foucault calls into question is simply the manner of treating the articulation of identity as the search for something concrete, with a set goal of discovering some fundamental truth about the self. Foucault does, however, still proceed to encourage a form of self-knowledge, not about some authentic self, but instead regarding the self's position in relation to society—namely, this knowledge is an awareness of the influences of society and the contingent, constructed nature of the self. Along with this self-knowledge, and as counterintuitive as it may seem when discussing Foucault, his project of "care of the self" also assumes a measure of control that the self is capable of exercising over the expression of his own life. In order to successfully detangle oneself from formative social pressures, one must be capable of controlling some direction of one's own life—which requires *something* that is exercising this control, constantly moving the self from one set of social pressures to the next, and resisting the codification of a single identity.

In this sense, the "care of the self" that pervades much of Foucault's later work is distinctly different than the creation and articulation of an intrinsic identity that is the foundation of the self and the center of one's life. Instead, "care of the self" is a perpetual undertaking, a constant occupation with the position of the self and a sort of resistance one takes against the pressures of society. This critical self-evaluation that Foucault endorses does not have a clearly

articulated goal—there is no “right” and “wrong” manner of expression and it does not uncover some ultimate truth that gives one’s life meaning. Instead, it is simply a constant focus on the self’s position in society, the active expression of acknowledgement and resistance which one undertakes in an effort to assert one’s individuality without tying oneself to it. Yet even without the institutionalization of this self-project and its foundation in the ideal of authenticity, Foucault’s “care of the self” is still fundamentally focused on the self in the manner of a self-project that is ultimately grounded in a form of self-knowledge and the exercise of that knowledge for a specific self-focused purpose.

#### **IV. A Different Framework: Hannah Arendt**

Yet as seen at the beginning, the way in which Taylor and Foucault discuss identity in terms of a self-project based in self-knowledge and reliant upon a sense of independence and control over one’s own life and the articulation of one’s identity, is not the only theory of the self. Working from a separate foundation than both Foucault and Taylor, the theory of identity of Hannah Arendt comes to radically different conclusions as to the nature of the self, even as it absorbs and combines some of their most compelling aspects. Harkening back to the conception of identity of the Ancient Greeks, with its entanglement of personal identity, political action, and the public sphere, the Arendtian project helps to critique the modern identity discourse. Instead of grounding her idea of identity in terms of self-knowledge and at least a semblance of control over one’s own life and one’s identity, as do Taylor and Foucault, Arendt sees identity as a by-product of political participation, an inherently uncontrollable and self-forgetting act. Arendt lifts the self out of personal and social concerns over the details of one’s life and instead elevates the “public business” that consists of concerns for the common world and the creation and care of



the civic body as a whole. In this sense, Arendt's conception of identity is irrevocably entangled with the obligations of citizenship and active participation in the public realm. With these priorities, Arendt is working from an entirely different perspective than both Foucault and Taylor—instead of an inherent focus on the introspective nature of a self-project and the plight of a singular self, whether the self's struggle to resist social pressures or the struggle for recognition of an authentic identity, the Arendtian self is only coherent, only ever present even, when one is publicly acting in the company of others, and engaged in public discourse instead of remaining focused on personal concerns.

Basing her worldview, as she does, on the model of the Ancient Greek polis, Arendt is working within a framework that locates freedom and identity in the public realm of the agora, where free men—those able to leave the private household and its focus on the life processes of birth, death, and reproduction—gathered to discuss the business of the polis face to face. Because of this emphasis on face-to-face interactions in public that forms the foundation of Arendt's work, her conception of identity is colored by the contingency and dependence that comes from entangling one's life with the actions of others. For Arendt, identity is a sort of “unchangeable essence” that remains unknown to the self but is disclosed through one's actions and speech in public. Because it remains hidden from the individual, and is only ever revealed piecemeal throughout one's life, identity, for Arendt, “becomes tangible only in the story of the actor's and speaker's life... [and] can come into being only when life departs, leaving behind nothing but a story.”<sup>30</sup> It is because of this narrative quality of identity that Arendt sees the public light and the presence of others as necessary for the articulation of identity—if one's

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<sup>30</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 193.

identity only tangibly comes into being as a story, it requires the presence of others to act as an audience: to both receive and retell that story long after one's death.

At the same time, this idea of identity as revealed in action seems to leave open the possibility of one attempting to directly influence one's legacy, to consciously act in specific ways and thus directly manipulate the disclosure of one's identity. But this is, for Arendt, fundamentally impossible without sacrificing one's life for this attempt at self-directed articulation because of the uncontrollable and unpredictable consequences that one's actions in public necessarily cause. Using Achilles as the paradigmatic example of an attempt to control one's identity, Arendt explains that "[o]nly a man who does not survive his one supreme act remains the indisputable master of his identity and possible greatness, because he withdraws into death from the possible consequences and continuation of what he began."<sup>31</sup> Because of the public conditions necessary for action and speech, the continuation of one's life necessarily means unpredictable consequences stemming from the (re)actions of others. And yet, even this conscious sacrifice of one's life for control over one's identity falls prey to the dependence on others for its propagation. "Even Achilles, it is true, remains dependent upon the storyteller, poet, or historian, without whom everything he did remains futile."<sup>32</sup> Instead, the Arendtian conception of identity sacrifices this attempt at control over the expression of one's identity and acknowledges the importance of one's peers to the process of revealing one's identity in the first place.

This is where Arendt's theory blends aspects of the two opposing theories of Taylor and Foucault: she grounds her conception of identity on the idea that each individual born into the

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 193-194.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

world is unique and has a distinct story to tell even as she embraces the contingent nature of that self, and the importance of one's community on the reception and articulation of one's identity. But Arendt uses these two characteristics of identity to arrive at a startlingly different picture of the self in relation to others, so that it becomes possible for Arendt to agree with Taylor in saying that "each man is unique, so that with each new birth something new comes into the world,"<sup>33</sup> even as she thinks this unique identity remains fully out of reach of the individual self and instead lies solely in the interpretation of one's actions by one's peers. Thus, even as she uses compelling aspects of these modern theories, Arendt comes to radically different conclusions, namely in her discarding self-knowledge as the foundation for identity itself. In fact, this is the most important difference between Arendt and the modern identity theorists. For Arendt, "[t]his disclosure of 'who' in contradistinction to 'what' somebody is... is implicit in everything somebody says and does...but its disclosure can almost never be achieved as a willful purpose."<sup>34</sup> Instead, for Arendt, the expression of one's identity is unconscious and uncontrollable, as "it is more than likely that the 'who' which appears so clearly and unmistakably to others, remains hidden from the person himself."<sup>35</sup> Arendt is following the old adage "actions speak louder than words," and because action requires both the presence and participation of others in the public realm, it makes identity contingent, reliant on the (re)actions of others, and clear only in retrospect—if it becomes clear at all. It is this dependence on the "audience" of one's peers for a coherent identity that leads Arendt to proclaim that "nobody is

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

the author or producer of his own life story”<sup>36</sup> and that at the same time unmasks the misguided nature of the conscious project of self-articulation in the work of Taylor and Foucault as a senseless expenditure of time and energy in pursuit of identity in a place it simply cannot be found.

Because of this dependence on others for the disclosure and perpetuation of one’s identity, the Arendtian self is similar to that of Foucault in terms of its contingency and social construction. There arises from this revelatory quality of action and speech an interrelation of people that makes the self fundamentally contingent on the words and deeds of others. Thus, no one can be truly in control of the consequences and interpretations of one’s actions and identity since “action and speech are surrounded by and in constant contact with the web of acts and words of other men.”<sup>37</sup> The very presence of others in the public realm, and the reliance on their participation in the expression of one’s identity, ties one’s identity up with the speech and action of others. Because of this interrelation and dependence upon others to articulate one’s identity, to demand or require recognition of a self-determined identity is impossible, as the political action that reveals one’s identity is both boundless and uncontrollable due to the presence of others and their influence on the process. Under this conception, “the pursuit of recognition expresses an aspiration to *sovereignty*...In this broader sense, sovereignty refers to the condition of being an independent, self-determining agent, characterized by what Hannah Arendt calls ‘uncompromising self-sufficiency and mastership.’”<sup>38</sup> The idea that one can discover and articulate a concrete identity that will then give the entirety of one’s life meaning is an idea that

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>38</sup> Patchen Markell, *Bound By Recognition*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 10-11.

one can ultimately govern one's life, as is the presumption that one can exercise control over one's project of resistance, and untangle oneself from social power. Working to uncover this authentic self or to resist social pressures are attempts to articulate and control an identity that is actually disclosed in one's action and speech in the public realm and remains hidden from the self throughout that process. It is inherently unpredictable, and subject to the influence of others who are a part of that public discourse. As such, seeking recognition of one's successfully self-articulated identity is an attempt to stand independent from the effects of others and to minimize the vulnerability that comes from appearing in public. And yet, this aspiration to sovereignty, to exercising ultimate control over one's life, is fundamentally impossible and ultimately dangerous.

Instead of a personal journey or introspective self-project, then, Arendt locates this revelation of identity in the public realm, the realm of politics. Politics, the only uniquely human act for Arendt, stands in opposition to necessity and personal concerns, and as such requires an act of self-forgetting. For Arendt, there is no room in politics for personal concerns—this act of self-forgetting, not to be equated with selflessness or altruism, is the act of “checking” one's personal baggage at the door of the political realm, and is a necessary step in order to enter it. For Arendt, personal concerns are grounded in necessity—they bind an individual to natural processes and keep one focused on food, shelter, sex, and so on. This self-forgetting nature of politics stands in opposition as the realm of freedom, where one can “forget,” those natural necessities and leave these concerns for the self behind, and for a limited time enter into a larger discourse, one that is wholly unnecessary and therefore freeing. Arendtian politics is a way of escaping nature and the limited scope of the personal realm. Instead, politics is about “larger-than-life” issues, things that affect everyone, like the creation and maintenance of the civic body, and existed long before and will exist long after the limits of one's natural life. Politics is a way

of interacting with both the past and the future, and as such “creates the condition for remembrance that is, for history.”<sup>39</sup> And this is why, for Arendt, identity is only coherent as it is disclosed through political action and speech—only in politics is one setting aside the pressing, natural, personal concerns and engaging with a large enough sphere to make a lasting impression on not only one’s peers but also the world itself in order to ensure one’s identity will be received and remembered after one’s death.

At the same time, the purposes and consequences of politics cannot be replicated on the individual level because the consequences of one’s actions, the mark one makes on the world in the name of political action, depend upon the presence of others to interpret and continue telling one’s story long after one’s life has ended. Things on a personal level are restricted by nature, and those projects centered on the individual and the scope of a single life are bounded by birth and death, whereas only politics, with its larger scale, can extend further. But by defining politics with such narrow content, Arendt seemingly dismisses some of the most common “political” topics today, calling the relevance of her theory into question. What is important for Arendt, however, is not necessarily the content of politics itself—the content is constantly changing with a changing civic body. Though some issues, like economics and health care, have no place in the political realm because they are fundamentally grounded in personal concerns and natural necessities and are thus essentially pre-political, the focus of Arendtian politics is primarily in the act of discussion itself, and her conception of politics and identity-in-action stresses the importance of the conversations about these larger issues of care of the common world over the focus on micro-managing the daily necessities of citizens. Politics is so important for Arendt because it is the means and mechanism for action, the ability to act with one’s peers to bring

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<sup>39</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 9.

something new into the world, as exemplified in the fundamentally political acts of founding and maintaining civic bodies. Action, in its Arendtian sense, like the politics which it accompanies, has an incredibly large scope—it is ultimately beyond the control of any single person, because it requires the presence of others to manifest in the first place.

The scope of politics is what remains important, for Arendt, and it is this scope and the consequences thereof that allow Arendt's theory to remain relevant even after significant shifts in modern sensibilities since the time of the Ancient Greeks. In this sense, the compelling aspect of Arendtian politics is its absolute belief in the extraordinary capabilities of mankind—"the fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable."<sup>40</sup> By removing the urgency and importance from exercising self-knowledge, Arendt gives individuals little reason to remain stuck in the limited private sphere, and instead encourages greatness on the level of politics and public action. The Arendtian model pushes one to go beyond oneself and enter into the public discourse, in an attempt to free oneself from necessity and to put oneself on display. This set of priorities that elevates one's legacy over one's life pushes individuals to achieve great things: it lifts one out of the limited perspective of a single lifespan and extends one's influence far beyond the one's natural limits.

In this Arendtian framework, one is only free and truly human when fully engaged in politics—participation in the public discourse and in the company of one's peers. From this perspective, the pursuit of a conscious self-project is to trouble and worry about one's fundamental nature and is restricting and essentially unfree. Identity, for Arendt, is irreducibly bound up with action and speech in the work of citizenship, and "[s]ince action acts upon beings

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

who are capable of their own actions, reaction, apart from being a response, is always a new action that strikes out on its own and affects others.”<sup>41</sup> Because of action’s inherently boundless and unpredictable nature, the fact that one’s identity is disclosed through one’s action means that attempting to manipulate or control one’s identity is a prideful and impossible task. Instead, the revelation of one’s identity is a consequence of political participation, and as such is based in an act of self-forgetting.

## **V. An Arendtian Critique of the Modern Identity Discourse**

While the self-projects of both Taylor and Foucault are compelling, speaking to some innate selfish, though reasonable, desire to place the self as one’s foremost concern, there are clearly significant disagreements between the two as to the nature of identity and the proper constitution of the self-project. And yet, viewing these theories from an Arendtian perspective serves to bracket these two opposing conceptions of identity as working within the same overall framework—one focused primarily on the self and the self-project—and helps to illuminate many of the problems inherent in the modern ways in which identity is discussed. Using this Arendtian model of identity, the most obvious problem that arises in those of Taylor and Foucault is their innate self-obsession, the fixation on the self and the self’s position as one’s key concern, and the grounding of their projects in a form of exercised self-knowledge. While this self-centeredness may seem, at first, one of the most compelling aspects of Foucault and Taylor’s projects, from the Arendtian perspective it becomes clear that this is the aspect, though serious in its own right, upon which more severe problems of the separation of identity from politics, and the consequent limitations of an individual’s freedom, are founded.

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.



In highlighting the importance of one's own personal search for authenticity, Taylor advocates a project of self-discovery that "takes its own fundamental identity to be the source that must guide moral life in general."<sup>42</sup> This elevates the position of the self above that of the community or place in which it is situated—the larger public realm. In this sense, Taylor's project remains focused on the concerns of the self, on reclaiming one's identity and remaining true to it—it is a quest to work on and articulate something that remains hidden from the self and is instead only ever evident to others. This elevation of the self, the selfish over-concern with the self's position, is a result of Taylor's movement to an individualized morality. With the "affirmation of ordinary life," he advocates a picture of identity that esteems the unique everyday experiences of the individual, and allows one to select for oneself, within reason, one's own moral code. This moves the self away from the traditional "higher" activities, like that of active, engaged citizenship, and encourages a withdrawal from the public realm in order to focus on one's private concerns, as these are the key to leading a successful life.

Foucault, too, though resisting this claim to truth about one's identity, still advocates the "care of the self" and the critical self-evaluation it requires, again placing the condition of the self above that of its community. In advocating a conscious resistance against social pressures and an active self-awareness of the ways in which that society's influence constructs a specific identity, Foucault is focusing directly on the self, elevating personal concerns about oneself and one's life above—in conscious opposition to, even—those of the community in which one is situated. For both Foucault and Taylor, their respective self-projects are important because they are fundamentally about bettering the position of the self in relation to society. Whether, as for Taylor, this project involves finding and articulating an authentic self so as to become a complete,

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<sup>42</sup> Connolly, "Beyond Good and Evil," 368.

coherent human being, or instead, as for Foucault, it involves unmasking this confining ideal of authenticity and ultimate, inner truth, the self project that elevates the individual and focuses concern on the self as such necessarily detracts from the business of the community as a whole. While the community does play an important role for the self in both Foucault and Taylor's work, it is a very specific, marginalized aspect. For Taylor, one's society plays a secondary, supporting role—the community in which one lives gives the self a coherent context, while Foucault sees society as the foil for the self, that against which the self shows individuality through resistance. In this sense, the works of both Foucault and Taylor presume a sort of overwhelming concern with the self—its position and problems—that also requires and assumes the ability to direct and control the expression of one's self-project.

It is in this elevated concern with the self where the narcissism inherent in this modern discourse becomes much more evident. The projects of recognition and resistance of Taylor and Foucault in effect preserve this desire for independence and control, elevating one's control over one's own situation over the influence of one's peers. It is precisely this separation of identity and the actions of others that makes this modern conception of identity so self-absorbed. The belief that one has any semblance of control over the articulation of one's identity is, at its core, the belief that one can separate oneself from society—even temporarily—and thus presumes an independence that Arendt simply does not believe in. This means that even though Taylor is clearly interested in the influence of others on one's search for authenticity, these actions of others are reduced to little more than recognizing or misrecognizing one's attempts at self-expression, or helping one to recognize oneself. These significant others are those who, in Taylor's conception, "know us intimately, and who surpass us in wisdom, [and] are undoubtedly

in a position to advise us.”<sup>43</sup> In this sense, “significant others” in Taylor’s conception simply serve to acknowledge one’s authentic self—they can provide commentary that affirms or denies one’s identity, but the identity itself remains unchanged, and is simply better understood and articulated by the individual. Even in cases of misrecognition, the damage done simply prevents one from successfully articulating one’s identity; the damage is still framed in terms of the inability of the self to express a form of self-knowledge. Similarly, society for Foucault thrusts the ideal of an authentic identity upon an individual, but this is not the result of others’ conscious actions in response to one’s actions in public, but is instead the external imposition of identity as a means of control and manipulation against which Foucault’s self must take it upon itself to resist in individual acts.

This is the essential difference between the ideas of Foucault and Taylor and that of Arendt. Far from the “secondary” role of society in the two former, acting as a foil for the self and a context against or within which one creates and articulates an identity, Arendt sees community as an active participant in the revelation and constant manipulation of identity: it is the community of one’s peers that acts as an audience for the display of one’s identity, receiving and reacting to one’s actions and interpreting one’s identity through them. It is the courage to relinquish any illusion of control and respond actively to the action of others, acknowledging the lack of control over the expression and reception of one’s identity, which allows that identity to be fully disclosed. Only in the self-forgetting that comes through entry into the public discourse can one truly achieve the humanity that comes from the freedom of displaying one’s actions, and identity, in public. There is a fundamental level of trust in placing the means to articulating identity through interactions with others that Arendt sees as important. Vulnerability, and the

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<sup>43</sup> Taylor, “What’s Wrong with Negative Liberty,” 147.

willingness to place oneself into such a position, to give up concern with the personal and enter into the unpredictable realm of action, is precisely that characteristic that brings one's identity into focus: "the connotation of courage... is in fact already present in a willingness to act and speak at all, to insert one's self into the world and begin a story of one's own... courage and even boldness are already present in leaving one's private hiding place and showing who one is, in disclosing and exposing one's self."<sup>44</sup> As such, the desire to remain independent, to separate one's identity from the effects of others and stay true to one's authentic self is an attempt to remain outside the unpredictability of the public realm, to remain in control of one's identity and the recognition thereof. It presupposes, almost requires, an ability to control the manner through which others can interpret one's identity, and ground identity itself in the exercise of self-knowledge. The vulnerability to social manipulation which Taylor and Foucault wish to avoid in the advocacy of a self-project controlled by the self is the same quality which one must overcome to enter the realm of revelatory action, and which lends credibility, even greatness, to the disclosure of one's identity itself.

Even as the self-obsessive quality of the modern identity discourse lends the individual a false sense of sovereignty, a sense of independence from the public realm and control of the ways in which one's identity is recognized by the self and others, it also encourages one to waste time on a misguided undertaking. The problem with a doctrine of self-articulation is, for Arendt, that "the moment we want to say *who* somebody is, our very vocabulary leads us astray into saying *what* he is; we get entangled in a description of qualities he necessarily shares with others like him."<sup>45</sup> It is thus the case that the attempt to define oneself will necessarily fail because

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<sup>44</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 186.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

one's identity is impossible to *consciously* articulate—the quality of identity that is unique to each individual cannot be explained within the confines of language, and can instead only be honestly revealed through action in public. Only one's own actions in the public discourse will readily reveal the identity that one can search for in vain and that will yet constantly remain hidden from the self. What is important here is the fact that the articulation of identity is only self-defeating when one is attempting *to articulate identity as such*. It is not necessarily that identity is indefinable (on the contrary, it can be and is displayed through one's actions) as such, but instead that it is only unable to be articulated directly through the self's own vocabulary and one's conscious efforts. That quality which drives one to embark on this project of self-description is necessarily the quality that causes the project to fail, namely its overt concern with the conscious articulation of something fundamentally inarticulate and hidden, and the exercise of self-knowledge that this requires. By contrast, one's identity is fully displayed only through the self-forgetting nature of action. “This disclosure of ‘who’ in contradistinction to ‘what’ somebody is... is implicit in everything somebody says and does. It can be hidden only in complete silence and perfect passivity, but *its disclosure can almost never be achieved as a willful purpose*.”<sup>46</sup> Thus the articulation of one's identity is an unconscious consequence of participation in the public realm and identity is disclosed through one's speech and action as part of a discourse about issues that are wholly unconcerned with the individual as such. This self-forgetting aspect of public participation is necessary in order to go beyond the limitations of one's natural life and enter into a realm of history, where one's actions and speech can be remembered by others long after one's death. With this in mind, Taylor's focus on the project of self-discovery and Foucault's project of self-evaluation are not only misdirecting the potential of

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 179. (emphasis mine).

an individual away from this public discourse, but are also damaging the self. The inward-looking project of self-definition, based in an articulated knowledge of the self, draws one out of the public realm and refocuses attention and energy in the realm of privacy, on an impossible articulation of an identity that, simply speaking, does not exist there.

While Foucault's conception of identity as expressed through one's action does lend itself to some striking similarities with Arendt's—namely its stress on the contingent nature of the self and the constructive influence of one's society—it remains clear that he has not escaped the self-obsessive quality that is so evident in Taylor's work. In advocating the explicit project of conscious resistance to the manipulative power of society, Connolly describes Foucault's project as one “to modify sensibilities of the self through delicate techniques... so that you no longer require the constitution of difference as evil to protect a precarious faith in an intrinsic identity or order”<sup>47</sup> In other words, Foucault does not escape the draw of the self-project, even as he endorses a constant critical self-evaluation. At the same time, however, just as Taylor's search for internal truth is ultimately fruitless, Foucault's encouragement for the self to undertake those “little deviant acts” in an effort to act on its own contingencies is to advocate a sense of exercised control over one's identity—as the project of “modification” assumes an ability to know oneself and the ways in which one's identity is constructed by society, and to consciously change them so as to minimize social control over these aspects of one's life—even if just for a short time. To advocate any sort of self-project is to ignore the inevitable actions and influence of one's peers, and to operate under a false sense of sovereignty and empowerment. While it seems at first counterintuitive to characterize Foucault's project as one of sovereignty, his project of asserting one's individuality through resistance is essentially that—asserting temporary control in

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<sup>47</sup> Connolly, “Beyond Good and Evil,” 373.

resistance against a normalizing society. Foucault's project is grounded in a form of self-knowledge, an awareness of the ways in which social power is manifested in one's life and the actions one can take to deviate from those expectations, thereby asserting some control over the ways in which one's life and identity are constructed. This project is not one of creation and acceptance, as is Taylor's, but it remains a project of recognition: one must recognize the social power at work and its influence on one's life before one can put that knowledge to work in acts of resistance against those pressures. In this sense, Foucault's "care of the self" is not an exercise of sovereignty over the positive articulation of an authentic self, but is instead the attempt at controlling—through a conscious use of self-knowledge in resistance—the ways in which social expectations and pressures are in fact exercised in one's life. It is a project of independence, though extremely limited and temporary, as one continuously tries to untangle oneself from the influence of social power. Thus, while Foucault's resistance to the ideal of an authentic self is not misplaced, in encouraging a project of resistance against that ideal is to once again advocate focus on the self and an exercised self-knowledge over self-forgetting and the public discourse.

While the compelling aspects of these projects that place primary focus on the self are certainly clear, it is no less the case that they fundamentally serve to help withdrawal the self from the public realm, the realm of political action and public business. Elevating the "care of the self," and the private concerns that it entails, above the public discourse does seem to speak to a deep-seated desire to protect the self from the vulnerable position that the public realm forces one to undertake. The self-absorbed focus on these self-projects allow one to remain secure in one's personal concerns without going to the trouble of worrying for the greater concerns of the community as a whole and consequently risk the misrecognition and influential action of others upon one's life that comes from participation in the public realm. At the same

time however, placing these private concerns above the worldly concerns of politics is to deprive one of the unique fulfillment of human potential that lies at the heart of political action. By creating spaces and reasons for individuals to quit the public realm for the seemingly more important self-project, the works of Taylor and Foucault induce one to stay in private and focus on one's personal concerns, remaining bound in the realm of limitation and necessity. By discouraging the cultivation of this courage or desire to leave one's "private hiding place," the self-projects of Taylor and Foucault serve to trap the individual in a fundamentally self-obsessive framework.

## **VI. The De-Politicization of Identity**

Foucault and Taylor's advocacy of a self-project based in a specific form of self-knowledge and achieved with some degree of independence and control illustrates a fundamental de-politicization of identity in its modern conceptions. Far from the way in which Arendt sees identity as necessarily contingent on political action and public participation, the way in which Taylor and Foucault advocate a focus on the self has turned concern with one's identity to an introspective, personal matter and away from the larger political concerns. This de-politicization of identity is a serious consequence of remaining stuck in the framework of self-obsession in which Foucault and Taylor find themselves, one that prevents the self from entering the public discourse, thereby limiting one's freedom.

For Taylor, "I define who I am by defining where I speak from, in the family tree, in social space, in the geography of social statuses and functions, in my intimate relations to the ones I love, and also crucially in the space of moral and spiritual orientation within which my



most important defining relations are lived out.”<sup>48</sup> The community, for Taylor, plays this role as the social geography from which one constructs one’s position and locates oneself. Yet Taylor’s focus on this social space of definition means the self-articulation of one’s identity with which he concerns himself does not come from disclosing that identity through action in the public realm, but instead from situating oneself in the social geography of family and relationships. In this sense, Taylor is stressing the wrong aspect—instead of acknowledging that identity is, in fact, revealed *in the act of speaking itself*, Taylor sees identity as “defining *where* I speak from.” For Arendt, the defining act of one’s identity, though Taylor is right to highlight the importance of others to this process, is actually participation in the political realm, the very public acts of speaking and deliberating, with other members of a given body politic, about politics. Politics is unique in this respect because of its self-forgetting, performative qualities and its large enough scope to effectively allow one the chance to be remembered by one’s peers. Only in politics is one able to leave the limited, personal concerns of one’s individual life and enter into a larger realm that has the conditions expansive enough for remembrance and revelation. Politics, in its entirety, is the actions and speech of a given body politic that has no independent existence—much like identity itself. It is thus that “[i]n acting and speaking [that] men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world.”<sup>49</sup> By contrast, Taylor’s self-project is of a different realm, one built not around public speech and action, but instead on a personal achievement, undertaken in private and grounded in the expression of a necessary self-knowledge. It is this necessity that marks the foundation of Taylor’s work as distinctly apolitical, as for Taylor this recognition of an authentic identity is

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<sup>48</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 35.

<sup>49</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 179.

required for an undamaged existence and as such is a project of mental health that should not be couched in the vocabulary of identity and is fundamentally a pre-political concern.

While Foucault does acknowledge the constructive influence of others on one's identity, he sees this influence as essentially devious and something against which to resist through exercised self-knowledge and control. In advocating a "care of the self" as a form of self project, despite the fact that such an undertaking is in resistance to those "various rules and behaviors" that society imposes on its members, Foucault is still suggesting that one remain focused on the articulation of one's own identity and concern with personal matters instead of forgoing that privacy and participating in the public discourse through which that "unchangeable essence" of someone is displayed honestly for all to see and interpret. Furthermore, Foucault explicitly denies this idea of "escaping" society that is crucial to Arendt's theory of politics and the freedom therein. Instead, for Foucault, there is no means of relieving oneself from social pressure—there is only the constant individual undertaking to trouble those pressures, and merely the hope of exchanging one set for another—and it is this sense of hopelessness present in Foucault's work that keeps the self focused inward, cynical of the extraordinary possibilities of politics and therefore unlikely to enter the larger public realm. For Arendt, however, and her idealistic faith in the capabilities of humanity, politics is a means of relieving the pressures of society and "escaping" into the realm of freedom with its larger concerns and unnecessary quality. Foucault's endorsement of resistance to these social manipulations means, for Arendt, that he is undertaking the wrong project. Instead of remaining in the same framework and simply troubling the workings of social power, as Foucault suggests, Arendt advocates a "setting aside," so to speak, of those concerns and instead entering into the fundamentally separate realm of politics, one with a new and different set of priorities, wholly unnecessary and therefore

liberating. Arendt, unlike Foucault, argues that there *is* a possibility of leaving—or at least ignoring—social pressure in the political concerns and action of the public realm, setting aside worries about private behavior and social expectations and entering a larger public discourse.

The repercussions of this framework stressing personal control and private concerns are evident in that by separating identity from politics, Foucault and Taylor have distinctly different ideas of what constitutes the proper end of the political realm and the individual's relation to it. For Taylor, who idealizes the individual's search for an authentic self, politics is useful only insofar as it provides a protected space within which those authentic selves can be discovered, influenced by the opinions of others but ultimately unencumbered by their prejudices, which may very well foster misrecognition and ultimately the mis-formation of the self-in-progress. Thus, for Taylor, it is of absolute necessity that communities accord each self the respect, even distinction, they deserve in their capacity to be a unique identity. Failure to accede this "recognition" to everyone who deserves it results in serious psychological damage. Because of this, the public realm is potentially stifling for Taylor, as it encroaches in the very private quest for one's authentic self—while true that it is a forum for the interactions of the self and the larger community, this also leaves one's identity vulnerable to the misinterpretations of others, through which irreversible damage accrues because Taylor leaves room for the individual to determine the veracity of this interpreted identity. For Taylor, politics is meant to encourage protection of the unique identities of both individuals and their larger cultures, and it therefore remains a political project to institutionally separate individuals from their larger society and to protect that fragile self from the backlash of public activity. And yet, while Arendt, too, leaves a "protected space" for the self, namely the private sphere itself that serves as an essential opposite to the public, Arendt sees this as stifling for the self, something to be escaped—not the end of politics,

but instead its foil. Therefore, while Taylor's concerns about the vulnerability of the self in public are valid, there is also something fundamentally courageous in taking that risk and entering into an acknowledged uncontrollable realm. And it is this measure of courage that Arendt sees as crucial for the articulation of one's identity, as it is a mark of the willingness and capability to leave the limited scope of the personal and make significant contributions in the larger scope of politics that ultimately allows one the opportunity to display one's identity for all to see and remember.

This separation of the individual from a political community is even more pronounced in Foucault's work, where the self-project specifically pits the self against its community, advocating an active resistance against the social pressure to conform to the expected modes of behavior. Here, Foucault encourages one to work to dislodge oneself from the entrenched values that appear in various social institutions. At the same time, however, this requires a sort of self-knowledge that makes one aware of one's relation to society, and a presumption of control in the ability to untangle oneself from that social power for a limited amount of time. Foucault pits the self directly against society, going further than Taylor and advocating not just the protection of the self in a sphere of privacy, but instead the active rebellion against the influence of others which, for Arendt, is the only means by which one's identity becomes coherent. For Foucault, the influence of one's community is somewhat sinister, making his political project one of resisting the influence of others by undergoing a constant critical self-evaluation and therefore undermining—or attempting to do so temporarily—the influence of others that he cynically sees as nefarious and binding.

By contrast, for the action-oriented, contingent self of Arendt's work the public realm and the opinions and interactions with others that give it substance, are the only means for the

liberation of one's physical, laborious private body and the self-interested concerns of the individual marked by necessity. Here, Arendt is drawing heavily again on the model of Ancient Greece, where the concerns with life as it appears in natural cycles and the necessity that accompanies these cyclical concerns were fundamentally opposed to the freedom that was found in the public square. In public, the realm of political action, men were no longer slaves to nature, and were able to act and speak on matters pertaining to the manipulation of the world itself—they actively took part in the shaping of their community and engaged in a discourse about the things that concerned them all. Because of this larger scale, especially in comparison with the limited and universally shared nature of private concerns, the public-political realm was where men could make a name for themselves—to go down in history and be remembered for their actions. And yet, in order to gain entry to this political discourse, it was necessary to leave one's personal concerns in the private sphere, an act of self-forgetting, so as to be properly able to focus, as it were, on the “bigger picture”—and in this action they consequently revealed their unique identities. The public realm and the interactions with others are not things from which the individual need be protected, for Arendt, but are instead the catalysts in understanding and manifesting one's identity in the only coherent way possible. What saves this claim from its sinister undertones is that the world from which Arendt is working is not solely a political one—in order for the political to make any sense as a public good, there must be some measure of privacy to which it can stand in opposition. The public realm, and the political action therein, should be allowed significant leeway, but it should also be remembered that it does not stand in isolation. The public realm need not be regulated or temporarily resisted and troubled in a misguided attempt to protect the fragile self, but instead it should be opened up and expanded so that each individual has access to the political discourse, and those same individuals should be

encouraged to enter into the public light, instead of focusing primarily on an introspective self-project.

Thus, with their determination to keep the individual “safe” from the harsh light of the political realm and the vulnerability it creates, Foucault and Taylor ultimately condemn the self to obscurity, limiting one to personal concerns and private interests and thus inherently limiting one’s freedom which, in the Arendtian perspective, is found only in political action. It is because of this self-obsessive withdrawal from the public realm of political action, and the subsequent prioritization of one’s personal/private concerns over the public discourse, that the modern identity project as it appears in the work of Taylor and Foucault is freedom-limiting when viewed from the Arendtian perspective, where freedom means escaping the inherent necessity of private concerns and focus on the self and actively engaging in the public discourse. Despite this, identity continues to be connected with freedom—for most of the modern conceptions of identity, there is something inherently liberating about expressing, and controlling the expression of, one’s identity. Yet this definition of freedom as a form or exercise of the self-knowledge upon which modern identity conceptions are grounded limits the scope of the self and prevents one from attaining the freedom that appears when one enters into the world and loses oneself in the concerns thereof. It becomes clear that because of their focus on the plight of the individual, Foucault and Taylor situate freedom in a very different place than does Arendt, namely in the successful discovery and articulation of a specific form of self-knowledge. Yet for them to define freedom in terms of individualism and place it within the grasp of an isolated individual as distinct from his corresponding community is to prevent individuals from actually seeking and successfully finding the Arendtian ideals of freedom and identity that are located only in public.

Instead, Arendt views this limitation of the scope of the self to personal concerns as bound by necessity and fundamentally unfree. The most pressing concerns for any individual relate to the natural qualities of rest, food, birth, death, and reproduction: cyclical processes that bind the self by their unrelenting necessity. Ensuring the health and happiness of an individual, as in the work of Foucault and Taylor, is an admittedly necessary task, even by their own admission. And yet, while Arendt, like Taylor and Foucault, entangles identity with an expression of freedom, she does so by lifting the self out of these personal concerns, like the care of the self, and elevating one's concerns to the care of the world, shared concerns that affect the larger community. This requires the act of self-forgetting, the abandonment of one's limited, personal concerns to be able to enter the larger political discourse. This ability to leave care of the self and focus on politics is the ultimate mark of freedom for Arendt, and a necessary step towards the revelation of one's identity through word and deed in public. The freedom in this act lies in its lack of necessity—political participation is a distinctly unnecessary luxury that one is only free to enjoy in the absence of the personal concerns that can crush an individual's spontaneity and capability for action. Political action is also the freedom to display one's identity in the company of others, to make a distinct mark on the world, and have one's story remembered and retold after one's death.

This entanglement with freedom, identity, and action in the public realm means that, unlike for Taylor and Foucault, freedom is, for Arendt, a fundamentally collective quality, and it can only be recovered in the public realm, though political action, since for Arendt, only the public realm "was reserved for individuality; it was the only place where men could show who they really and inexchangeably were. It was for the sake of this chance, and out of love for a body politic that made it possible to them all, that each was more or less willing to share in the

burden of jurisdiction, defense, and administration of public affairs.”<sup>50</sup> Freedom, for Arendt, is only ever possible in the company of others, and is fundamentally reliant on those others in order to exist at all. This means that Foucault and Taylor, by encouraging the self to pursue an individual undertaking with theories of freedom and identity based in an exercised self-knowledge, are ultimately cutting the self off not only from the expression of one’s identity in political action, but also from the very quality of freedom itself. Instead, Arendt’s project of self-forgetting, losing oneself in the broader concerns of the community and the public discourse, allows the self to escape the limited and confining framework dedicated to necessary concerns of the self, and to finally be free to express one’s identity, unconsciously, through political action.

## **VII. Arendtian Identity and the Modern World**

Given the framework in which Arendt is working, however, it remains to be seen whether or not her model of identity, based as it is on the Ancient Greek polis, can actually be translated into the modern world effectively. It is arguably the case that the Arendtian perspective of identity is useless given the shift in situation and sensibilities since Antiquity. The significant increase in the population of the modern world and the states within it, as well as the expansion of the civic body to include groups other than propertied white males, has worked to make the face-to-face interactions that marked the public discussions in the agora of Ancient Greece all but impossible. Most concerning in this shift is the shrinking and changing nature of the public realm itself that is so fundamental to Arendt’s work. Without a functioning public sphere in which action, speech, and identity became coherent, the Arendtian model is utterly ruined.

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<sup>50</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 41.



The worry of a shrinking public is not unfounded or untouched in Arendt's work—she, like Foucault and others, was immensely concerned with the disappearance of the public as it is increasingly consumed by “the social”—the concerns of mass society and individual behaviors, that should remain in private, entering the public realm and overriding those concerns of politics and the common world. As an illustration of this “rise of the social,” Arendt cites the “rise of housekeeping, its activities, problems, and organizational devices—from the shadowy interior of the household into the light of the public sphere.”<sup>51</sup> For Arendt, the rise of the social that creates and accompanies the decline of the political assumes a single, shared interest for the society in its entirety, one that appears similarly in economics and “polite society” with their emphases on human behavior—in the public light—instead of individual capability for action. Economics, with its concerns for people's needs and the assumption of a single set of behaviors is, for Arendt, the epitome of “the social” and its systematic annihilation of the public and private realms: “Economics... could achieve a scientific character only when men had become social beings and unanimously followed certain patterns of behavior, so that those who did not keep the rules could be considered to be asocial or abnormal.”<sup>52</sup> This same phenomenon is what Foucault took it upon himself to study—“the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects... the modes of inquiry which try to give themselves the status of sciences... the objectivizing of the subject... [and] the way a human being turns him- or herself into a subject.”<sup>53</sup> Arendt saw these social practices as an admittedly obvious consequence of an ever-growing population, since “the larger the population in any given body politic, the more likely it

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>53</sup> Foucault, “Subject and Power,” 208.

will be the social rather than the political that constitutes the public realm.”<sup>54</sup> The sheer mechanics of governing the masses makes it far easier to smother the political concerns of a community with the more simplistic, “scientific” needs of a society.

At the same time, this overwriting of Arendtian politics with concerns of the social calls into question the narrow and distinctly demanding definition of “political” that is central to her work. In restricting politics to exclude those economic and social concerns that do affect every member of a given community, Arendt’s conception of the political neglects a significant portion of modern governmental business. Additionally, Arendt’s limited sense of the political confines it to the public sphere, ignoring recent moves to extend political discussions to domestic situations and issues within the household, like the feminist message that the “private is political.” Here, again, the fact that Arendt is basing her work on the smaller, strictly segregated society of Ancient Greece seems to detract from its relevance in the modern world. The expanded civic body, with its inclusion of various minority concerns, means that the limited scope of the political that Arendt seems to endorse can mark her entire theory as suspect.

What saves Arendt’s conception of identity from becoming obsolete, and allows it to retain its relevance in the face of these concerns, as well as Taylor and Foucault’s competing theories, is that the importance of Arendt’s public realm is not in the literal act of entering the physical space of the public square for discussion, but is instead the act of self-forgetting that occurs there and is necessary for successful entrance to the public realm at all. Keeping in mind that the content of politics is, for Arendt, the common world, and the concerns thereof, it would seem that the “public realm” has not disappeared from the modern world, but has simply shifted in character while still retaining this focus on self-forgetting and participation in public discourse.

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<sup>54</sup> Arendt, *Human Condition*, 43.

Thus, while the public gathering of the entire civic body in a single agora may not longer be feasible, this Arendtian sense of politics and self-forgetting remains present in contemporary discussions of environmental conservation and rebuilding infrastructure. These issues, and others like them, are about shared concerns and a world beyond a single lifespan. They are wholly unnecessary discussions, a luxury only available to those who have fulfilled their more pressing, necessary, personal concerns. These examples of environment and infrastructure are also relevant political concerns due to their extended nature, the fact that the actions of individuals today will make an impact far into the future. As such they are fundamentally discussions as to the nature of the common world and the ways one wishes it to look and outlast a single individual life, and therefore any personal considerations must be left behind in order to successfully engage in these instances of public discourse. This is why politics, in its Arendtian sense, is also exemplified in academic interplays, in published exchanges of ideas, and classroom discussions about the things that affect everyone and the common world, any time individuals forget their personal needs and private concerns and enter into a larger political discussion. These various “new” political activities still retain their Arendtian political nature in the fact they are all forums for the discussion, between peers, of the world and that which is held in common. These examples of public discourse are different from those more common conversations over the health and wealth of a citizenry in that they are ultimately about the future of the common world, and as such require a setting aside of one’s limited personal perspective in order to consider one’s influence on the world that will outlast one’s natural life. Through these “new” incarnations of political debate, individuals can still earn distinction, leave their mark on the world, and in so doing reveal their identity for all to see.

What the Arendtian conception of identity requires for its success in this modern world is that these various examples of public action, and others like them, reclaim their place of importance to the modern individual. Often, these issues of the world are framed in terms of personal concerns and how they can help meet one's private needs, continuing the trend of egocentricity that marks the focus on self-knowledge in both Taylor and Foucault's work. Instead, an effort to truly free the self from this limiting framework means that a reorientation is necessary, turning the self towards the larger common concerns—not for personal gains or a concentrated effort of self-articulation, but because only through participation in these new incarnations of Arendtian politics, can one successfully reveal one's identity in the world. In order to overcome the limited scope of the modern identity framework, one must ultimately relinquish personal concerns and the illusion of control over one's own life and the articulation of one's identity and submit to the unpredictable and boundless nature of political action. It requires an act of self-forgetting instead of self-knowledge, and only through this means of inserting oneself into the larger scope of the world can one's identity, and ultimately one's freedom, be exercised.

Despite these radical differences between the Ancient Greek model of identity and public action, founded on the basic acts of self-forgetting and engagement with the public discourse, and the modern incarnations with their focus on the personal journey of an individual that is grounded in an exercise of self-knowledge, identity continues to be an essential aspect of human life. Identity is universally shared, and because of this it retains a relevance that is timeless—despite the shifts in population, sensibilities, and values over the years, the creation and articulation of identity and its significance to and acknowledgement by others has persisted. Because of this commonality, the discourse of identity itself is of a truly political nature, and as

such it should be extended and expanded as an example of a relevant avenue for the expression of freedom, and the display of identity itself—much like the other examples of “new” forms of Arendtian politics mentioned above. Its centrality to the human condition ensures that identity will consistently rank among the most prized of human virtues, meaning it will virtually always remain entangled with other important aspects of the human condition, such as politics and freedom, and will continue to remain one of the most important and relevant topics for political discourse.

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